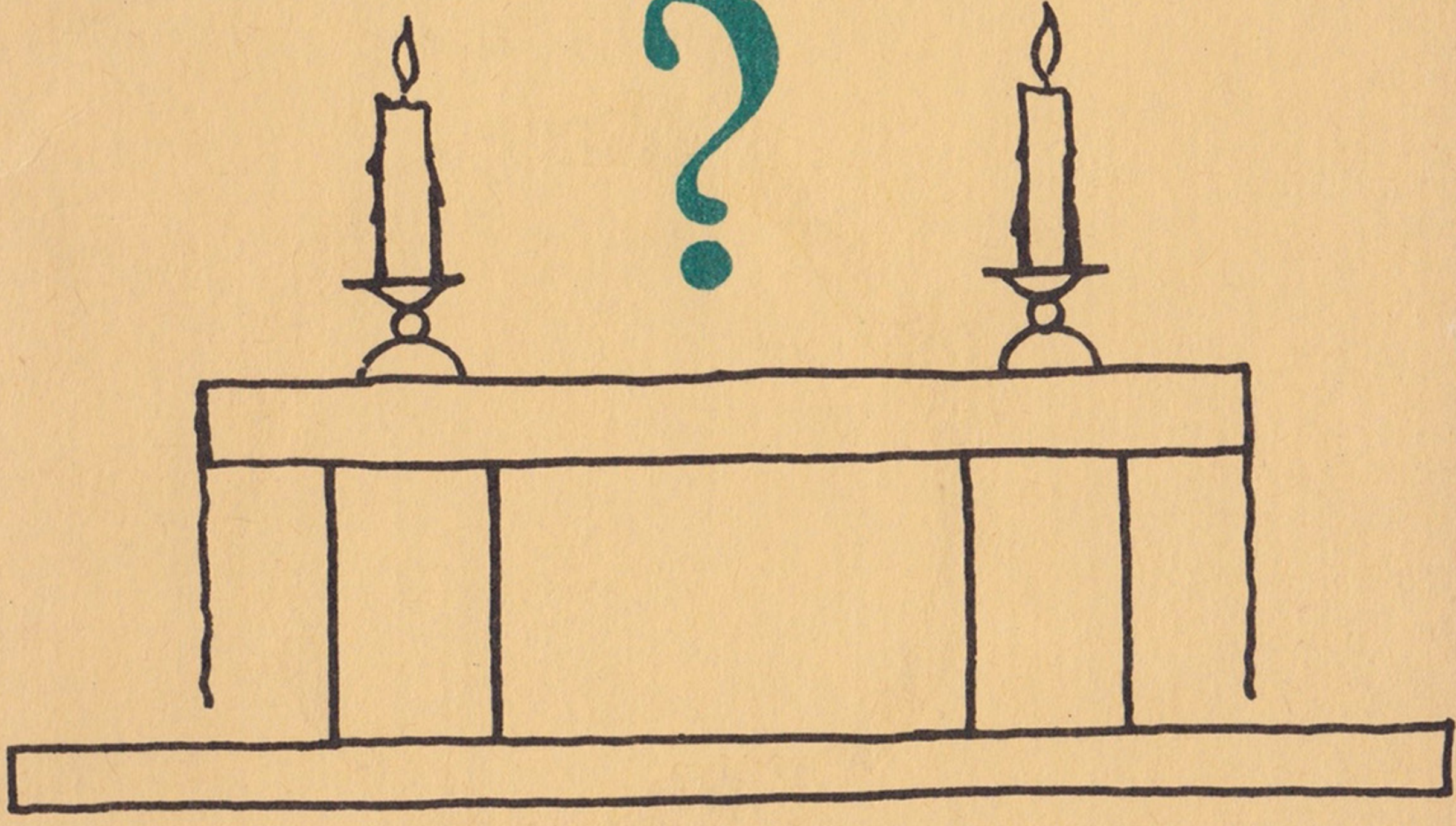
WHO MAY STAND AT THE ALTAR ?



THE CELEBRANT OF THE EUCHARIST

by

T. M. PARKER

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"Who may stand at the altar?"

A paper read by Dr T. M. Parker at a conference
of the Theological Committee of the Church Union
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FOREWORD

THIS paper was written at a time when the principle of priestly celebration of the Eucharist was under fire as a result of proposals for re-union with other groups of Christians who lacked the gift of the priesthood.

Today another danger threatens. Within the Church of England the idea is being canvassed that laymen, with no pretence to orders of any kind, could be authorized to celebrate the Eucharist. It is in view of this that a re-issue of Dr Parker's effective pamphlet is practical and timely.

DOUGLAS CARTER

THE CHURCH UNION
Faith House, Westminster.
September 1974

"Who may stand at the altar?"

1. Sic sacrificium istud instituit,
Cuius officium committi voluit
Solis presbyteris, quibus sic congruit,
Ut sumant, et dent ceteris.

This stanza from St Thomas Aquinas's hymn, *Sacris solemniis*, in the Corpus Christi office sums up as succinctly as anything I know what most of us would take to be the Catholic belief about the celebrant of the Eucharist—Catholic both in time and space. It is the belief which has been repeatedly challenged since the sixteenth century and is challenged widely to-day, and it goes without saying that it lies at the heart of most disputes both about reunion and intercommunion. We are necessarily faced with the vital question of whether it is true.

2. It may be well to start with a few facts which would be universally admitted and on which dispute is barely possible.

(1) Christ's command, "Do this" was given to the Twelve. No others were present at the Last Supper. Therefore it could be only by inference that we could suppose that it was intended in the first instance for any others than them—although, equally, unless we imagine that he foresaw no more than a brief future for his Church on earth, it must be supposed that it was intended later to apply to others beyond the original Twelve.

(2) There is no positive evidence down to the sixteenth century of anything other than episcopal or presbyteral celebration of the Eucharist in the Great Church. Diaconal celebration is mentioned only to be condemned and lay celebration not at all, except as an eccentricity of

heretical or schismatic sects or individuals. A good example is Firmilian of Caesarea's account of the woman prophetess who, in the times of disorder after the death of Alexander Severus in 235, deceived a group of dispersed faithful, including a priest (significantly described as *rusticus*) and a deacon into accepting her claims. St Firmilian, who regards her as an energumen of the gravest kind (*principalium daemoniorum impetu ferebatur*), gives as one of the supreme examples of her audacity the fact that she frequently "pretended by means of a liturgically not ridiculous form of invocation to sanctify bread for herself and make eucharist and to offer sacrifice to the Lord not without the sacrament of the accustomed ritual words."

"Inter cetera quibus plurimos deceperat etiam hoc frequenter ausa est, ut et invocatione non contemptibili sanctificare se panem et eucharistiam facere simularet et sacrificium Domino non sine sacramento solitae praedicationis offerret." (Cypriani *Ep.* lxxv. 10).

The context of the letter in which this passage occurs is the argument against Pope Stephen in the baptismal controversy that sacraments outside the Church are invalid. The stress is laid upon the fact that this woman's baptisms, in which she made use of *usitata et legitima verba*, were effected by the wicked spirit which possessed her, the argument being that to acknowledge the validity of heretical baptism, as Stephen and his adherents did, provided that the due form was observed, would logically involve recognising also such baptisms as these, which were plainly diabolical. But it is interesting to notice that he seems to draw a distinction between the woman's eucharists, which were pretences (*eucharistiam facere simularet*) and her baptisms in which at most (if the word has its bad sense) she 'usurped' the formula of interrogation

(*usitata et legitima verba interrogationis usurpans*), which might well imply that lay baptism might be valid within the Church but never a lay eucharist. In any case any suggestion that eucharistic celebration by others than bishops or priests in the formative period of the Church occurred or was reckoned valid must rest upon inference, not on any positive evidence, which is completely lacking. All indications (such as the argument of I Clement and the statements of St Ignatius of Antioch) point the other way and a contrary argument would at best rest upon such suppositions as that the celebrant to whom Ignatius contemplates the bishop committing the Eucharist might be a deacon or layman or that Justin Martyr's 'president' was a member of the congregation chosen for the occasion. These are wholly gratuitous hypotheses and, moreover, go against the weight of the evidence that eucharistic celebration was regarded as the peculiar function or 'liturgy' of certain ranks in an hierarchical church. (The clearest expression of this is St Clement's comparison of the Christian body with the old Israel and its gradation of High Priest, Priests and Levites (I Clem. xl sqq.), which evidently seems to him both the obvious analogy and an argument in itself against the lawfulness of ejecting from the episcopate those who have "blamelessly and holily offered the gifts.") I do not feel that I need linger on the early evidence, for it has been admirably, and I think quite fairly, set out by the Bishop of Exeter in his pamphlet *The Celebrant and Ministers of the Eucharist* (Studies in Eucharistic Faith and Practice, ed. F. L. Cross, No. 1, (London, 1957)), nor, so far as I am aware, have his conclusions been effectively challenged. It is not an exaggeration to say that no one has yet produced either any primitive statement that an ordained minister is *not* necessary for a valid Eucharist nor any example of a

recognised Eucharist so celebrated. (Even the conclusions drawn from the *Didache* by the Harnack School rest upon the unproved assumption that the apostles and prophets there mentioned were self-appointed.)

(3) It is not always observed that Luther's doctrine of the ministry (upon which all Protestant views on the subject ultimately rest) does not derive from any objective re-examination of early evidence or usage, but is put forward to support a claim that there is no essential difference between the spiritual and the temporal power. He seems to have arrived at it in the winter of 1519–1520, when it first appears in his correspondence, and it was first expressed in his *Sermon on the New Testament or the Holy Mass*, printed in April 1520, where one finds the assertion that all Christians of every rank and of both sexes are priests. It needs emphasis that this is *not* merely a doctrine of the priestly character of the Christian community as a whole, although the only biblical texts which Luther can produce in support of it are the familiar ones from I Peter (ii. 9) and Revelation (v. 9-10). Luther holds explicitly that each individual Christian, in virtue of his baptism, is a priest and capable of celebrating and administering all the sacraments. To quote the classic passage in the *Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation:*

"When a bishop consecrates, he simply acts on behalf of the entire congregation, all of whom have the same authority. They may select one of their number and command him to exercise this authority on behalf of the others. It would be similar if ten brothers, king's sons and equal heirs, were to choose one of themselves to rule the kingdom for them. All would be kings and of equal authority, although one was appointed to rule. To put it more plainly, suppose a small group of earnest Christian

laymen were taken prisoner and settled in the middle of a desert without any episcopally ordained priest among them; and they then agreed to choose one of themselves, whether married or not, and endow him with the office of baptizing, administering the sacrament, pronouncing absolution, and preaching; that man would be as truly a priest as if he had been ordained by all the bishops and the popes."

(Bertram Lee Woolf: *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, Vol. I (London, 1952), p. 114).

Luther does indeed hold that it is not lawful for anyone to act as a priest unless appointed to the office. "For although we are all equally priests, still not all of us can serve and minister and preach" (*Liberty of a Christian Man*, 17, op. cit. p. 367). But this is a matter of vocation and orderliness, not of difference in power or inherent status. Indeed it is the conception of any inherent difference between priest and layman that Luther is anxious to combat and here lies the real motive for his new doctrine. The passage quoted earlier comes from his attack on the 'first wall of the Romanists', namely the distinction between the spiritual and temporal powers. This, in Luther's view, prevents the needed reform of the Church, because it means that the lay power cannot punish unworthy priests. In this context Luther attacks the idea of *characteres indelibiles* conferred by ordination (which he denies to be a sacrament), maintaining instead that the *charisma* needed to consecrate the Eucharist or perform other sacramental acts is conferred once for all by baptism.

"If we ourselves as Christians did not receive a higher consecration than that given by pope or bishop, then no one would be made priest even by consecration at the hands

of pope or bishop; nor would anyone be authorised to celebrate Eucharist, or preach, or pronounce absolution."
(*Appeal*, p. 114)

It seems quite clear that the operative factor in making Luther reach this conclusion was the practical consideration that the idea of a church hierarchical in the distribution of spiritual gifts or functions, rather than a body in which power comes from below, was the chief obstacle to reform. His conception of justification by faith only and the the way in which he related this to the sacraments, making them guarantees of grace already received and means for quickening the faith by which it had been received, rather than channels of grace, made such a view possible and might theoretically have led to this position in any case; in actual historical fact it was the circumstances of the years 1517–1520 which supplied the impetus. What certainly was absent was any objective re-examination of Christian history and tradition; Luther is thoroughly medieval in his preference for *a priori* reasoning from what he has come to regard as fundamental principles—chiefly his interpretation of Pauline teaching in the light of Augustine.

3. If one takes together the three facts stated above —facts not easily, I think, contested—certain conclusions seem to follow. Let me recapitulate the facts.

(1) The Eucharistic commission to "do this" was given to the Apostles and directly to nobody else. In the absence of proof to the contrary it would seem to fall into the same category as the parable of the servants waiting for their lord. "Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all? And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make

ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?" (I.k. xii. 41–2.)

(2) There is an absolute absence of evidence during the first 1500 years of the Church for any recognised celebrant of the Eucharist other than a bishop or presbyter. One cannot of course easily prove a universal negative, but on the other hand it cannot be *disproved* except by positive contrary evidence, not merely by inference which, so far from being based upon positive indications, seems to run contrary to such evidence as we have. Put in another way, it is quite clear that, long before the time of St Thomas Aquinas, we can take it for granted that eucharistic celebration was regarded as committed *solis presbyteris* or, more exactly, *solis presbyteris atque episcopis*, the actual historical order being the other way round, for there is abundant evidence that episcopal celebration was originally the older norm. (It is well here to remind ourselves of the fact that *hiereus* and *sacerdos*, when first used in connection with the Christian ministry, are names normally applied to bishops and not to presbyters. The usage continues as late as the time of Bede. The matter has recently been interestingly discussed by Père Gy O.P. in a contribution to *Etudes sur le sacrement de l'ordre* ("Lex orandi" 22, Paris, 1957) pp. 125 sqq.)

(3) The first explicit assertion that eucharistic celebration is within the power of the laity comes with Luther and is bound up so closely with his assertion of the right of the secular power to reform the Church that it is difficult to believe that it is not derived psychologically from it.

4. All this seems to me to add up to the conclusion that the *onus probandi* in this matter lies very much with those who

deny that priesthood is essential to the eucharistic consecration. It is clearly not a case in which the 'sacerdotalist' attitude can be shown to be an accretion; it is already there in I Clement. Nor is it a case in which two views have struggled with each other throughout church history. Apart from some assertions of Tertullian (and those very significantly in his Montanist works), I know of no clear trace at all of a view that celebration by any Christian can be valid before the time of Luther. The Protestant position is the novelty which has to justify itself.

5. If this is so, why is it held so strongly to-day and why does it prove such a crux in matters of reunion? I suggest the following reasons amonst others:

(1) A potent reason is the familiar difficulty of readjusting one's thinking to a new intellectual situation, even when it is perceived. It is difficult for us to realise the immense prestige that Luther and the other Continental Reformers have for those brought up in a Protestant ethos; anyone who has heard the awed voice in which a German Evangelical says: "*Luther sagt* . . ." will recognise it. The fact that the Lutheran assertions were made in an age when scientific church history was only about to be born, and at a time when for many reasons they were welcome, weighs very little with those who regard Luther as a prophet. Are not such mental attitudes frequent in history? Did not the Donatists long cling to the exploded story of Caecilian's consecration by a *traditor*? How long did it take the Nag's Head fable to die? Are we not familiar with similar episodes in the history of Anglican apologetic?—for example the reluctance of many to recognise the kinship of ideas between the English and Continental Reformers? This is a factor

we must reckon with and use both patience and tact in dealing with it. It is fatal to say to an opponent, however true the remark may be, "Yes, of course, you *would* think that." What C. S. Lewis once called Bulverism in controversy (*Socratic Digest*, No. 2. Oxford, 1944, pp. 16–20) is a double-edged weapon, but this ought not to blind us to the fact that inherited prejudice does not yield easily to argument.

(2) Akin to this is the fact that, despite the revolution in Biblical studies, a great many minds are still prisoners to a greater or less extent of the Liberal age, which in Old Testament studies inculcated a depreciation of priesthood and sacrifice as compared with prophecy and, in New Testament studies, played down all institutional elements in Christianity. This, I think, reveals itself in two ways especially:

(i) The importance of the sacrificial system and the Old Testament priesthood in the *praeparatio evangelica* is is much underestimated. In particular, the fact that the apparently straightforward story of the Aaronic priesthood dissolves under criticism into something like idealised history induces many people to think that the Old Testament insistence upon its exclusive rights has no message for the Christian Church. The old type Protestant interpreted the Epistle to the Hebrews as if it meant that all priesthood other than the personal Priesthood of Christ ceased under the New Covenant; the modern one is apt not to take at all seriously its affirmation that "no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron" (Heb. v. 4). Some of us deiive not a little of our convictions about the necessity of priesthood for validity from the stories of Aaron's rod and of Korah, Dathan

and Abiram, instilled into us in youth. It might be suggested that, on any serious view of revelation, these are not in the Bible for no reason at all.

(ii) In New Testament matters the idea that sacramentalism derives from pagan infiltration of the Gospel dies hard, despite all recent progress in liturgical studies and the demonstration of the continuing force of Hebrew conceptions in a rapidly Gentilised church.

(3) There is, I think, a certain confusion between two connected but distinct issues:

(*a*) That considered here, whether anything more than the status of a baptised Christian is necessary in the celebrant of a valid Eucharist.

(*b*) Whether episcopal ordination is necessary for a valid priesthood.

Protestant opposition takes two forms, according to whether it is primarily directed to (*a*) or (*b*). The radical position, held by most Baptists and some Congregationalists and others, that lay celebration is valid is often not clearly distinguished from the 'high' Presbyterian and Methodist view of the 'parity of ministers' and hence of the non-necessity of episcopal ordination—sometimes not even by those who hold these views. In many cases there seems to be a kind of amalgam of both points of view. The fact is that historically all Protestant doctrines of the ministry derive from Luther, but many modern Protestants do not realise this and have been influenced to some extent, although not fully, by the rather 'higher' Calvinist view of the ministry or by the effect produced since the Reformation by such developments as the demonstration of the genuineness of the authentic Ignatian Epistles.

6. In the light of all this, if the considerations I have advanced have any cogency, what should be the policy of those who wish to defend and propagate Catholic belief on the relationship between the Christian priesthood and the Eucharist? I should like to end with some suggestions.

(1) First and foremost, more and more attention must be paid to the doctrine of priesthood in Old Testament and New Testament alike and in particular to the implications of the Priesthood of Christ. This is too vast a subject on which to embark here, but it is in this direction that our Biblical scholars can serve us best. In the last resort everything rests upon this. It is only if the revived interest in the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ can be linked with the way in which that Priesthood is exercised in the Body that the whole subject can be tackled at a higher level than the merely legalistic. As always, it is a question of trying to eliminate the vicious effect of an 'either . . . or' approach. Is there really any incompatibility between the idea of a Priesthood of the whole Body and of a specialised Priesthood within it? (It is worth while considering that if this were a question of how the *prophetic* office of Christ is exercised through his Mystical Body there would probably not be the same kind of clash of opinions that there is in respect of priesthood.)

(2) Some attempt ought to be made to disentangle the question of episcopacy from the more general issue of priesthood. To my mind this is perhaps best approached by starting from the priority of episcopal eucharistic celebration over presbyteral. The issue is *not* whether bishop and presbyter were originally identical or not, but whether a valid eucharist requires a spiritual connection with the most general Christian ministry, the

apostolic-episcopal, which alone can, in a Christian context, be priestly in the full sense.

(3) Space has prevented me from considering a very vital issue, namely, whether Christian priestly function is to be conceived of in terms of power or of authority. William Temple once said that the former idea had no meaning for him and it is certainly the case that the approach to the doctrine of the ministry associated with the names of Headlam and Quick is very obviously dominated by the idea of authority. (It is this which explains the idea that in a divided church all ministries are more or less invalid—and presumably therefore all Eucharists also?—an idea which has bedevilled a great deal of recent ecumenical discourse.) On this I would say only two things:

(i) No one, however 'high' his doctrine of the Ministry, really regards it as the repository of a personal magic power akin to that of a shaman, although many Protestants probably think this is the Catholic idea. On any showing priestly power is derived at all moments from Christ—a fact expressed in the doctrine, at least as old as Ambrose, that the priest consecrates *in persona Christi*. It would be well if we emphasised this fact more.

(ii) It almost follows from this that *potestas* and *auctoritas* are fundamentally the same thing in the function of the Christian ministry. To possess authority from Christ is to have the *power* to do what he did and does, for the authority of Christ can be effectively resisted only by the freewill of man, not by sacramental elements. (This is surely the real meaning of the term *ex opere operato*, as opposed to *ex opere operantis* in the doctrine of the sacraments.) But, in the light of New Testament teaching, it is, to say the least, unlikely that

Christ's authority is given fully and entirely to *every* individual member of his Body.

7. Perhaps I may best end by quoting what seems to me the most thoughtful and pregnant statement of the Catholic doctrine of eucharistic celebration ever penned, that of Louis Bouyer in his *Life and Liturgy* (London, 1956), p. 146:

"It is essential, therefore, to the accomplishment of the Mystery in the Church that it should be dependent upon a ministry through which Christ himself, in that unique conjunction of divinity and manhood which is achieved in his single Person, should be permanently present to make of each and every eucharist his single Eucharist. Here precisely is the function of the apostolic ministry. Through the apostles and those men whom the apostles sent in their turn as they had been sent, Christ is always here present among us to speak and to act. Even though they are sinners as we are, the Word of God in Christ is still active on their lips just as it was on Christ's lips, because it is always the same Word: because, in a Judas as well as in a Peter, the Word is not said except by Christ himself, who is the living Word of the Father.... This is the clue to the significance of the apostolic ministry and of the fact that only a man who has validly received the divine commission through the apostolic succession can validly perform the Eucharist."

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